THE SEVEN PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

CANON ERSKINE HILL

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The Seven Parables of the Kingdom

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By the Rev.
Henry Erskine Hill, M.A.
Rector of St. George's Church, Maryhill, and Canon of St. Mary's Cathedral, Glasgow

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Dedication.

TO THE RIGHT REVEREND FATHER IN GOD,

WILLIAM THOMAS HARRISON, D.D.,

RECTOR OF THORPE MORIEUX,

FOR THIRTEEN YEARS MY BISHOP,

AND FOR TWENTY-ONE YEARS THE KINDEST

OF FRIENDS, THIS BOOK IS,

WITH HIS PERMISSION, AFFECTIONATELY

DEDICATED.

Preface.

PERHAPS there is no other phrase in Theology so full of compressed meaning, so capable of expansion before the gaze of developing man, as the phrase, "The Kingdom of God." To attempt to define it is folly. It is only possible to show by a number of illustrations some aspects of its comprehensive and manifold meaning. To identify it practically, as is often done, with the Christian Church, is to limit woefully its width and scope. The Church is only an instrument for its advancement in the world. "How shall we liken the Kingdom of God? or in what parable shall we set it forth?" So spoke the Divine Wisdom, and the words imply a difficulty which is inseparable from the subject. The language of earth affords no sufficient medium for suggestion of spiritual things, far less for definition; the capacity of man for receiving spiritual teaching is largely latent. To explain wireless

telegraphy to savages with their cramped and limited vocabulary would be a trifling task compared with the presentation to the earth-warped minds of men and in human language the mysteries of the Kingdom of God. Critical scholarship can tell us much about the current beliefs among those to whom the Divine Master spoke, but it is *His* standpoint and not theirs that we need to know, and it is just here that scholarship fails us. It is not possible to reach the thought of Raphael by studying the Sistine Madonna under a microscope. It is the seer, not the scholar, the mystic rather than the critic, who must guide us here. The following short studies in the Parables of the Kingdom are an attempt to interpret them by seeking as far as possible to realise that the Master, with His consciousness centred in the world which is real, and spiritual, and eternal, always spoke from His own point of view and not from ours, and left His words to be progressively apprehended by the unfolding spiritual faculties of evolving man.

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I.

The Parable of the Sower.

S. MATTHEW XIII. 3-9.

"Behold, the sower went forth to sow; and as he sowed, some seeds fell by the wayside, and the birds came and devoured them: and others fell upon the rocky places, where they had not much earth: and straightway they sprang up, because they had no deepness of earth; and when the sun was risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And others fell upon the thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked them: and others fell upon the good ground, and yielded fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He that hath ears, let him hear."

THE Seven Parables of the Kingdom form a complete and perfect whole, a bright and luminous constellation for the firmament of Christian thought, but the light is only visible to the inner eye, and the truest way to study them is meditation.

S. Matthew pointedly links to the story of these parables an incident which

happened just before, and the connection is worth noting.

"While Jesus was speaking to the multitudes one said to Him, Behold, Thy mother and Thy brethren stand without, seeking to speak with Thee. But He answered and said unto him that told Him, Who is My Mother? and who are My brethren? And He stretched forth His hand towards His disciples, and said, Behold my Mother and My brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of My Father which is in Heaven, he is My brother, and sister, and mother." In other words, physical relationship, as such, was nothing to Him compared with spiritual affinities. His interrupter based His mother's claim on Him on the former, He on the latter. The consciousness of the world was centred in the physical, His in the spiritual, and, —and this is the important point for us— His words bring Him into living touch with disciples in every age.

"*On that day*"—with His mind full of the thought of the relationship between Master and disciples, Jesus went down

to the seaside and sat in a boat and taught the multitude that had gathered around Him.

"*Behold, the Sower went forth to sow.*" Thus He began the first great parable of the Kingdom which tells of the efforts of the Powers above to reach and help mankind and of the varying character of the human response. And then the disciples came to Him. In the pause, we may imagine, and the silence when the story has been told, "Why speakest Thou unto them in parables?" they asked in lowered voices. "Unto you," He answers, "it is given to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, but to them it is not given."

These are striking and pregnant words. In this teaching, then, there is a surface meaning and a deeper mystical meaning; and the worldly mind, however sharp it may be, however intellectual and clever, cannot penetrate below the surface. Only moral and spiritual effort can develop the faculty by which these things are seen and known. Without that effort religion becomes a mere external thing.

"To them that are without, all these things are in parables."

A parable contains truth as a nut contains food. The husk not only conceals the kernel, but it suggests, protects, and preserves it. How often our Lord spoke in language which His immediate hearers misunderstood, and which He knew they misunderstood and yet left unexplained! The outer form or phrase concealed a truth, and the truth would keep. He knew that He spoke for all ages. If a truth is to live and be transmitted from age to age, it must find outward expression and embody itself in a form or a phrase.

Hence we learn at once the value and the weakness of symbolism. "Only the husk," say some. Yes, but realise the value of the husk and the office it is created to fulfil. Those spiritually backward people whose religion consists mainly of forms, and those others—equally backward—who are less attracted by forms than by phrases, are just the people of whom our Lord says that to them all these things are in parables. Yet let

them have their parables. This very reverence for form and phrase is just the beginning of a glimmering sense of the real eternal truth which they enshrine.

Now before we study in detail these parables of the Kingdom, there are two preliminary thoughts which we must bear in mind :—

First.—The Kingdom of God is not defined ; it is suggested.

With us Westerns the passion for definition is almost a disease. It is not possible to define adequately in mere terms of intellect things which are only "spiritually discerned." We can only usefully define in terms of what we already know. A child of three or four years of age will gain a far truer idea of electricity from illustrations than from definitions. There are two ways of bringing home to a child's mind what a diamond is. We may tell its weight, measurement, shape, and constituent parts, or we may hold it up, hiding its shape and measurement in the brilliance of its own flashing light.

It is in this latter way that the Master

brings before us the Kingdom of God. For nearly two thousand years theologians have tried to define it, and tried in vain. It eludes their definitions: it breaks away from their restrictions: it is greater than their thought. Jesus did not try to define it. He held it up before the awakened spiritual sense. The seven parables in which He revealed it are like seven facets of the diamond—each gives its own distinct and brilliant ray.

Then next—and this is most important—we must realise our Lord's standpoint.

His consciousness—unlike ours—was centred in the spiritual. The things which seemed real to men were mere shadows to Him. Let us imagine a person, endowed with what we might call X-rays sight, looking at a closed wooden box in which a coin has been placed. To him the box, which is all we can see, is but a shadow, while the coin invisible to us is the reality to him. Even so our Lord's standpoint is fundamentally different from the ordinary standpoint of men; and if we are to understand

His teaching, we must let imagination help us to take His point of view.

To a consciousness centred in the physical world actions are nearer than emotions, and emotions nearer than thoughts; but were the consciousness centred in the spiritual world, the focus would be entirely changed. Then the thought would be more visible than the feeling, while the action would be more remote than either.

Thus, when our Lord says to a disciple, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but go thou and preach the Kingdom of God," it is obvious that He is speaking of those who are absorbed in the perishing things of a perishing world, in whom eternal realities awaken no response. To a spiritual consciousness such a life is a buried life, and we find an echo of this teaching of Jesus in the words which S. Paul quotes to the Ephesian Christians: "Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall shine upon thee."

Thus the Kingdom and rule of God which in the higher worlds is a fact,

is in this world a cause—an advancing cause—"conquering and to conquer," but still with manifold obstacles to overcome.

Bearing in mind, then, these two preliminary thoughts, let us look at the first of the Parables of the Kingdom. "Behold, the Sower went forth to sow." The initiative is from above. It is the story of God's effort and man's response. From the beginning of humanity God has been teaching to every nation and race and generation as much of His truth as it was able to assimilate. "At sundry times, and in divers manners" He has spoken by His prophets. The whole world is full of His thoughts materialised in nature. The thought world around us and within us is vibrating with great and noble ideas—living seeds seeking lodgment in the minds and hearts of men.

But what is man's response? "Some fell by the wayside." There is no lodgment there, no entering into the fruitful soil through that hard, beaten path. The seed is there, but the earth is unreceptive.

By wireless telegraphy words and messages are being continually flashed around the world, but those messages only exist for those who use a receiver tuned to vibrate in harmony with the instrument which sends them forth. Even so the ennobling thoughts of the best and highest of the human race and of

> "Those great intelligences fair
> That roam above our mortal state,"

may pass us by and awaken no response. Great impulses from the heart of God, mighty "movements" to help and raise the world, may be stirring all around us and not even disturb our indifference.

"Two men shall be in the field." "Two women shall be grinding at the mill." Outwardly their circumstances are the same. Looked at from the world side there is nothing to choose between them. But one is responsive to the impulses of Heaven, and one is only alive to the changing things of a changing world. The Kingdom of God passes by, and one is caught up into the enthusiasm

of its life-giving activity, and for the other it does not exist.

"Some great Cause—God's new Messiah—offering each the bloom or blight,
Parts the goats upon the left hand and the sheep upon the right,
And the choice goes by for ever 'twixt that darkness and that light."

"The one is taken and the other left."

"*Some fell by the wayside*," and found no entrance—that is the Earth's tragedy as seen from Heaven. "Some fell by the wayside and the birds came and devoured them." We can almost hear the sadness of the Master's tone, like the sadness of those beautiful words attributed to Him in the *Logia* :—

"I stood in the midst of the world,
And in the flesh was I seen of them.
And all men found I drunken,
And none found I athirst.
And My soul grieveth over the sons of men
Because they are blind and see not."

How truly worth our while it is to tune our whole being—body, soul, and spirit—into responsive communication

with the higher world! As our spiritual faculties develop, it will grow around us as the physical world grows round a man awaking from sleep.

"*Some fell on rocky ground.*" It gained entrance but found no depth. The results were immediate because the ground was shallow. Too quick and ready a response is not a good sign to one who *sees*. It springs from the feelings: it has not been really weighed by the mind. It is a matter of impulse, not of will. It is the "Hosanna" of the excited crowd, the offer, "Lord, I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest," from one who has not counted the cost.

All enthusiasm needs testing. That was why the Master warned from Him those whose devotion would be scared away by the Cross. The Church is in constant danger of being satisfied with emotional and immediate results.

The cause of Christ loses far more by the collapse of that shallow enthusiasm which, "when trouble or persecution ariseth because of the Word," falls away, than ever it is benefited by its adherence.

"*Some fell among thorns.*" The seed here finds entrance, and there is no lack of depth, but the energies of the soil are largely absorbed by other and useless growth. How often a man's religion is spoiled because he is never free from the anxiety of the world and the illusions of wealth! Prayers are hurried, meditation is crowded out, and business cares, like fussy and restless attendants, follow him into the house of God and even to the Altar rail; and the divine impulses, and ennobling thought, and half-formed resolutions come to little or nothing.

"*But others fell on good ground.*" That is a picture of the result when body, soul, and spirit are purified and trained to respond to the impulses and thoughts of God. They enter into a man's being, they become his life, and bring forth fruit, "some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold."

The Parable of the Tares.

II.

The Parable of the Tares.

S. MATTHEW XIII. 24-30.

"The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man that sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away. But when the blade sprang up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. And the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst thou not sow good seed in thy field Whence then hath it tares? And he said unto them, An enemy hath done this. And the servants say unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he saith, Nay; lest haply while ye gather up the tares, ye root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather up first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them; but gather the wheat into my barn."

THE wheat and the tares in this parable represent good and evil in their widest sense—good purposes, thoughts, desires, actions and habits in good people; and

evil purposes, thoughts, desires, actions and habits in wicked people. Could anything be more comprehensive than our Lord's own explanation, "All things that offend and them which do iniquity?"

In this, as in the previous parable, the seed comes to be identified with the lives in which its growth is manifested. We may compare the verse, "The tares are the children of the evil one," with "These are they that are sown by the wayside, such as hear the word," etc.

Such loose phrasing seems strange to us who are accustomed to teach by careful definition. We must remember that an Eastern master teaches not by definition, but by picture, parable, and suggestion.

Now let us recall the standpoint in both parables. We are given pictures of *the world as seen from the spiritual side.*

In the Parable of the Sower we have the response of Earth and the efforts of the Powers above. But that picture by itself is incomplete. The companion parable is needed to supply another aspect.

Is evil only the failure to respond to God? Is sin merely a negative thing? The shadow where the sunlight of love fails to reach?

Our Lord deals in this parable with the problem of evil. The field is the world as seen from the Heaven side, and from that source only good, ennobling, loving thoughts could go forth—only suggestions of whatsoever things are lovely and pure and true and of good report. But what about the response? It is not only negative, not only failure to give lodgment to what is good, but there are evident signs of virulent and active opposition. There is not only *vis inertiæ* to overcome in the effort to elevate the race, but an active force working in the opposite direction and against evolution.

This parable deals not with the comparative failure of the good seed to grow, but with the deliberate sowing of a noxious weed. Thus we may truly say that it is a revelation of the malignancy of sin.

It is not possible to explain the Temptation in the Wilderness, the Agony in

the Garden, and the Outrage of Calvary in terms of what is sometimes called "New Theology." The world was not only indifferent to the Christ—it crucified Him.

"*Sir, didst thou not sow good seed in thy field? whence then hath it tares?* There is something very beautiful in the glimpse given into the angelic mind. If the last parable dwelt on the irresponsiveness of men to good, this one indicates incidentally the irresponsiveness of the angelic mind to evil. This is a point of resemblance and kinship between the mighty intelligence of a seraph and the mind of a little child. Recall the child-like simplicity, the angelic dignity, the heavenly majesty of S. Gabriel's rebuke to Zechariah, who had doubted his word, "I am Gabriel, who stand in the presence of God."

The sinless intelligences of Heaven recognise evil as a fact, but we gather from our Lord's words that its origin and process and motive are to them incomprehensible. The tares were sown "while men slept."

The answer of the owner of the field in the parable seems to set the stamp of Divine authority on the doctrine of the malignancy of sin. "*An enemy hath done this.*"

"*Wilt thou then,*" the servants in the parable ask, "*that we go and gather them up?*" Is evil to be attacked by the heavenly Powers when and where it shows itself? Is it then and there to meet with its check and overthrow? And if not, does not the problem of evil itself pale before another—the problem of the toleration of evil. In a well-known picture of Glencoe, the widow who finds the body of her murdered husband lying in the snow, raises to Heaven a hand of indignant protest and appeal. Why? why should the treacherous outrage have happened? Why should it have been allowed to happen?

"While the Sky, who noticed all, makes no disclosure,
And the Earth keeps up her terrible composure."

And so clouds gather round the Great White Throne. That "Why?" so often asked on earth, is an echo of the question put in higher worlds than this: "Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up?" No, it is not God's way. "*But he said, nay, lest while ye gather them up ye gather up the wheat also with them.*"

Good and evil are inextricably mingled in the world and in every one. Let both ripen to their harvest and then the separation will come. "The harvest," says Jesus, "is the consummation (fulness of the time) of the age"—(*not* "the end of the world"), and the reapers are the angels."

So *the parable is the revelation to us of a vast, continuous, and certain process* which is going on all the time, and which is visible to those who have eyes to see it.

It is within—"in the heart," the Master tell us, that evil takes its rise, and at that stage it is more real and visible to the angel watchers than in the world of action towards which it is ripening. When an evil thought has been transmitted into an evil desire,

and the evil desire has reached a certain degree of intensity or ripeness, then the occasion is offered for it to turn into an action, and so it perishes in pain.

The thought of malice, *e.g.*, and bitter hatred indulged, is invisible to us. It may be concealed beneath the mark of a smiling and placid face, but to the Powers above it is as visible as it is intolerable. It cannot remain—it is not allowed to remain in the world of thought. It is cast out, it is changed into a desire, and as such it thrills the whole nervous system,

"With devil's leaps and pulses in the blood."

The opportunity is given ; the murderous blow is struck ; and as we on earth read with horror the news of the terrible crime the angels see in that crime the casting of the evil into the furnace of fire in which it is destroyed. Think of the plot of Judas and the fierce desire for the price of his treachery growing into a frenzy, and think Who it was who spoke the words which sent him out into

the darkness, "That thou doest, do quickly."

I think it would be true to say that the wonderful passage in the fourteenth chapter of the Revelation of S. John, which describes under different figures the double harvest of earth, is just an expansion of the main thought of this parable:—

"And I saw, and behold, a white cloud; and on the cloud one sitting like unto a Son of man, having on his head a golden crown, and in his hand a sharp sickle. And another angel came out from the temple, crying with a great voice to him that sat on the cloud, Send forth thy sickle, and reap: for the hour to reap is come; for the harvest of the earth is overripe. And he that sat upon the cloud cast his sickle upon the earth; and the earth was reaped.

"And another angel came out from the temple which is in heaven, he also having a sharp sickle. And another angel came out from the altar, he that hath power over fire; and he called with a great voice to him that had the sharp

sickle, Send forth thy sharp sickle, and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth; for the grapes are fully ripe. And the angel cast his sickle into the earth, and gathered the vintage of the earth, and cast it into the winepress, the great winepress, of the wrath of God. And the winepress was trodden without the city, and there came out blood from the winepress."

There is the same teaching. The angels see thoughts and desires both good and evil ever ripening towards action, and when a certain point of intensity or ripeness is reached, the occasion is supplied. The sickle is thrust in—the harvest is reaped—the good is gathered into God's barn and the evil burned up in pain. And so the harvest is the fulness of the time—in other words, the time of ripeness—and the reapers are the angels.

It is our part to take a wide view of the world and life, to use imagination to enable us to see things from the angel's point of view.

All evil is perishing—it is ever ripening

to its destruction. All evil thoughts, wicked desires, sinful habits are passing to those never-dying fires of suffering which we see all around us. All selfishness, lust, greed, hate—"all things that offend"—they have no permanent place in God's universe. The only permanent thing about evil is its perishableness. It is perishing everlastingly.

There are conditions of earth life which are to the higher worlds what the Valley of Hinnom was to Jerusalem. Into that gruesome valley was flung all the refuse and rubbish of the Holy City. It was the scene of the continuous destruction of what was cast out. Those two agents and allies of purity were ever active—the worm never died and the fire never was quenched.

"Roaming through the Universe," says Emerson, "I saw the little that is called good moving onwards to eternal life, and the vast all that is called evil hastening to merge itself and become lost and dead."

"*This is the note of Evil, for good lasts.*"

And what of the harvest-time in each individual man when he puts off this body at death and the experiences of life on earth are gathered in?

How much of good there has been and how much of evil! How strangely mingled they are and intertwined!

"O man, strange composite of Heaven and earth,
Majesty dwarfed to baseness—fragrant flower
Running to poisonous seed.

"O what a shifting parti-coloured scene
Of hope and fear—of triumph and dismay,
Of recklessness and penitence."

Surely the words apply here too. "Gather together *first the tares*, and bind them in bundles to burn them." For evil must be destroyed in penitence and pain. *It* is not gathered into God's barn. *It* is not stored up in that part of man which is immortal. *It* is not woven into his character—but rather in the interests of his future development, its association with suffering is fixed in that subconscious memory which we call our conscience.

And, on the other hand, every good thought, every holy desire, every kind

and loving deed is inwoven into the very fibres of man's being and harvested far beyond the reach of death or change into the storehouse of character, which is God's barn.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed.

III.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed.

S. MATTHEW XIII. 31, 32.

"The kingdom of heaven is like unto a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: which indeed is less than all seeds; but when it is grown, it is greater than the herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of heaven come and lodge in the branches thereof."

THESE Parables of the Kingdom are meant to give us aspects of the working of God's cause in the world as it is seen by a spiritual being from the heaven side, and let us remember that to such a being the world of thought is nearer and more visible than the world of action in which thoughts ultimately materalise.

The two former parables dealt respectively with the varying response of earth to the efforts of Heaven, and with the

opposition of evil, its malignancy and its transiency.

The latter parable dealt with the age-long process in which as the time of ripeness comes all evil is being burned out in the unceasing fires of suffering and pain, and all that is good is being inwoven into the characters of immortal men, or in other words gathered into God's barn.

In this Parable of the Mustard Seed we are given another aspect of the Kingdom of Heaven. Our Lord tells us of the growth and development of good as seen from the spiritual side until it supplies a point of contact between the earth and the heaven world.

"The kingdom of heaven is like unto a grain of mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field: which indeed is less than all seeds; but when it is grown, it is greater than the herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the heaven come and lodge in the branches thereof."

Consider for a little the mystery and the miracle of growth. The man sows his grain of mustard seed, and within

its tiny circumference is concealed the invisible germ of that wonderful reality which we call life. That germ has a potentiality and character all its own, and when placed in favourable conditions it will come into manifestation in the physical world. It will clothe itself in a form which will not last indeed, but which will reveal nevertheless not only its own nature but something of God as well.

"Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies,
And I hold you here, root and all, in my hand
Little flower—but if I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is."

And the method of growth, how marvellous it is! Whence comes the form which in time enshrines the life concealed in the seed? What silent power working from within draws to itself the material of earth and air, and weaves and compacts them into the body of the graceful moulded stem and uses all the influences of sun and rain and

frost and storm till it becomes a tree and the birds of the air find foothold and lodgment in its branches?

What wonderful power familiarity has, to destroy wonder! What mysteries worthy of an angel's study lie round us on every side!

Now all this growth outwards towards physical manifestation is—our Lord tells us—a type of the growth of good towards the spiritual and eternal world—as seen by the angels. They watch from their side the growth of good as we from the earth side watch the growth of a tree.

Failure to see this point of view is surely to miss the whole teaching of the parable, just as a worm under the earth fails to know the nature of the tree among whose roots it dwells.

It is difficult to imagine any more unsatisfactory, inadequate or superficial explanation of this parable than that of commentators who only see in it a narrow and somewhat commonplace allusion to the rapid growth of the future Christian Church from an organization composed of a few individuals to

a world-wide communion embracing millions. That is an example of the common tendency to read into our Lord's words the thoughts of a later age, narrowing most deplorably His conception of the Kingdom of God.

The parable rather represents the development of good in its widest sense as it takes root in the hearts and lives of men and grows towards heaven.

Take, for example, filial love. How beautiful it becomes and how divine! and yet its beginnings are "of the earth, earthy"—feelings of physical comfort associated with the sight of the mother's face—beginnings as invisible to angels as the blind motions of the buried seed are to us. But though that love takes root in the earth it emerges from it and enters into the freedom and sunshine of the spiritual life.

Who that has once read it can forget that touching and beautiful description which S. Augustine gives of his conversation with his saintly mother shortly before her death as they stood alone at the window overlooking the garden in Ostia

on the Tiber? When, "forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forth unto those things which are before" they were enquiring between themselves in the presence of the Truth . . . of what nature the eternal life of the saints would be, which "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man." "And when," he writes, "our conversation reached this point that whatever delight the bodily senses is ever capable of . . . seemed, in respect of the pleasures of that higher life, not only unworthy of comparison but even of being named, we, raising ourselves with more ardent affection towards the same, did pass step by step through all corporeal things even the heaven itself . . . Yea, we soared higher still by inward musing, speaking and admiring Thy work; and we came to our own minds and passed beyond them, that we might touch that region of unfailing richness, where Thou feedest Israel for ever with the food of truth . . . And while we spoke and panted after that, we touched It for a moment

with the whole effort of our heart, and we sighed and left there bound the first-fruits of the Spirit and so returned to the sound of our own mouth."

And they thought if a moment like that could be expanded into eternity, would not that be " Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord ? "

So they spoke, and then Monica said, " Son, for my own part nothing in this life gives me any further delight. What do I here longer ? There was one thing for which I wished to stay a little longer in this life that I might see thee a Catholic Christian before I died. My God hath granted me this and more than this—even that I should see thee despising all earthly happiness and devoted to His service. What do I still here ? "

Think of the spiritual expansiveness in its full growth of that love which in its origin took root in the things of sense. Look at its branches spreading wide in the sunshine of Heaven. See how it has pierced its way " through all corporeal things," through the world of desire reaching the mental world and passing,

beyond it, till it touched for a moment the changeless world of bliss," "the peace of God which transcends all thought"; and then say if that is not a truer illustration of the inner meaning of the parable than the mere numerical increase of those who declared themselves Christians, say, in the age of Constantine.

"*The kingdom of heaven is like unto a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in a field.*" Notice the careful sowing of the seed by the man "in his field." In the first parable the sowing was wide and indiscriminate. So heavenly seeds are not only sown broadcast by the Powers above, but are carefully planted. Let a person prepare his heart and mind for God's sowing. Let him practise habitual and regular meditation. Let him withdraw his consciousness from the things of sense and still the surging emotions and steady and concentrate the mind. Let him make it in very truth God's field. The living seed will surely be planted which will grow upwards to eternal life.

Here also in that heavenly planting we can watch the mystery of growth. The divine life within the implanted thought will silently exercise its power of attracting to itself kindred thoughts. It will strike its roots deep into the human nature, and will draw from the emotions and from the daily experience of earth life sustenance by which it will grow toward Heaven and toward God.

At first indeed "*it is less than all seeds, but when it is grown, it is greater than the herbs.*" Every word is full of meaning. In a spiritually-minded man how true it is that the heavenly learning implanted in his times of silence and communion with God, when he sits like Mary at the Master's feet, comes to overshadow all other interests!

They, too, have their place, thoughts of business, of politics, of society, the plans and amusements of earthly life; but their place is only subordinate. Compared with the interests which centre round that holy discipleship, they are but as the herbs to the spreading tree.

And then comes the most beautiful

touch of all, the suggestive words from the King of Poets, "*It becometh a tree so that the birds of the heaven come and lodge in the branches thereof.*" "The birds of the heaven." How suitable a figure to suggest the holy angels!

When Dante emerges from the dreadful under-world of his vision he sees beyond the sea, like a distant star, a tiny speck of light, and as it swiftly approaches on either side there appears something white, and he turns enquiringly to his guide. "Bend, bend thy knees," he hears; "Behold, the angel of God. See how his wings turned heavenward beat the air with his eternal plumes." "Then," says Dante, "as nearer and nearer came the Bird Divine my eyes endured him not."

"Thou Bird of God!" exclaims Browning, as he gazes on Guercino's picture of the Guardian Angel at Fano.

We have often seen—as no doubt Jesus had often seen—little birds trying "with trembling wings" to find rest on one of the lesser shrubs and trying in vain; and then at length finding safe

foothold on the spreading branch of some tree.

Consider how difficult it must be for those blessed and holy beings who have their home in that spiritual world, into which only in rare moments like that described by S. Augustine our consciousness ever penetrates, to get into anything like contact with us of this lower life.

Of their deep and loving interest in mankind we have the repeated assurances of the Master Himself. Yet ordinarily our lives are such as to render us all but entirely unresponsive to efforts at approach from the spiritual side. What possible point of meeting could there be, for example, between an angel and a miser? They live on two totally different planes, which at no point intersect.

And yet is it not mere matter of history that all down the ages wherever a certain point of spiritual development has been reached, that contact has been established, and steady and uniform testimony has been borne to the fact? I do not refer to what are called "Bible Times" alone, though there, of course,

it is beyond dispute; and those exceptional men who were chosen and sent by God to be the apostles of the Christ and who received His wonderful training, seem to have lived the latter part of their lives in very frequent converse with the angel world; but the teaching of the later ages bears testimony to the same truth, that the saints who have been "the choice vessels of God's grace and the light of the world in their several generations," have known something of that blessed fellowship and have realised by personal experience even while on earth, what it is to have come to "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable hosts of angels to the general assembly and Church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven."

"Hereafter," said Jesus to Nathanael, "ye shall see the heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

The opening of heaven is the awakening in ourselves of the faculty of seeing it. To see in and through all grades of creation

from the lowest to the highest—from the glimmer of the Divine visible in every blade of grass to the dazzling glory which shines through the Seraph the One Living Light of the Manifested God—to realise that that Living Light on which from the profound depth of heaven the angel world reaches to us—the basis of its existence—the medium of its approach—that Light which is the very staircase set up from earth to heaven and binding both in one is none other than the Christ Who is in them—in us—in all.

To have that vision always—to see it everywhere—that was the promise given to Nathanael.

And what was the beginning which should grow to that splendid consummation? The efforts no doubt often painful and difficult, the laboured concentration, the meditations puzzling and confused—the devotion in the solitude and silence beneath the fig tree.

Truly "the Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: which

indeed is less than all seeds ; but when it is grown, it is greater than the herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the heaven come and lodge in the branches thereof."

The Parable of the Leaven.

IV.

The Parable of the Leaven.

S. MATTHEW XIII. 33.

"The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened."

THE first six of these Parables of the Kingdom are set forth in pairs. The Parable of the Tares accompanies that of the Sower, and the Parable of the Mustard Seed has as its companion that of the Leaven.

Now we saw that the Parable of the Mustard Seed shewed us how from the spiritual side the great Intelligences who watch over the development of man, seek for a point of approach—a point of contact—and often seek in vain. They are like Noah's dove flitting over the great waste of waters which found no rest for

the sole of its feet. And then here and there, emerging from the flood of worldliness, is found some life beginning to respond to spiritual things. Here and there the energies of life, so often dissipated and wasted on earthly pursuits, are turned Godward, and spiritual growth follows until at length a foothold is supplied for "the birds of heaven."

That parable gives us a picture of the increasing intercourse of developing man with the powers above him. It describes the process of approach to the innumerable company of angels, the Church of the firstborn.

God sows His seed on the spiritual side of man's being, and it grows heavenwards. But that is only one aspect.

The companion Parable of the Leaven tells us under a new figure how the life of God works earthwards too. Beginning in the spiritual it works outwards.

"*The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.*"

Let us learn first of all this great

principle that God works from within outwards. The leaven is hidden. It begins its fermentation all unseen. It works in silence. It creates disturbance. It develops new attractions and repulsions. Gradually the dough is leavened. Even so when the life of God begins to reveal itself in man it works silently and from within. A disturbance is set up. The old order of things begins to change. The thoughts reveal new attractions and new repulsions. The desires are set on different things and the change of character shews itself in change in conduct.

And what are we to understand by the reference to "three measures of meal"? Some commentators tell us with an assurance which is surprising, that we are to attach to these words "no significance!" It certainly seems an overbold way of dealing with the words of our Divine Lord. But indeed the significance does not seem far to seek. "May your spirit and soul and body," says S. Paul, "be preserved entire, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Man has a physical nature, a psychic

nature, and a spiritual nature. Again the apostle tells us that there is a psychic (ψύχικόν) body and a spiritual body. Our consciousness may be centred in the senses, in the emotions, or in the thoughts. Surely these and similar passages supply a sufficient clue to the reference to "three measures of meal."

In studying the Parable of the Tares we saw how an evil thought is transmitted into an evil desire, and that again into an action in the material world, burning itself out in pain. Here we have an account of the outward process of good. The leaven of the divine life begins in the spiritual sphere and purifies the thoughts of men there, working its way outwards it reaches the emotions and ennobles and exalts them, and finally the conduct with its actions and habits is subdued to the will of God.

Let us take a concrete case. Here is a man, let us say, who is living a selfish and sinful life. His *thoughts* are evil and he indulges them and so inevitably he stirs into activity sinful *emotions and desires;* then as a further step he yields

his members servants to unrighteousness till the very features respond, till, in the terrible words of the prophet, "the show of their countenance witnesseth against them; they declare their sin as Sodom, they hide it not."

Suppose that in such a life there takes place that great and blessed change which we call Conversion or turning to God. Let us notice what it is that happens. A new principle has been introduced. Repentance does its work and the sense of forgiveness and peace spreads into the life and love awakens and gratitude; in short, it is the entrance into the life of the Kingdom of God. And it works like leaven. In the region of the thoughts the new attractions and repulsions reveal themselves at once. The old evil thoughts which used to be welcomed now excite violent opposition. "Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate thee?" becomes the cry, and thoughts of whatsoever things are pure and lovely and of good report are admitted which before sought entrance in vain. Next the change spreads to the emotions

and feelings. The old surging passions are stilled, and love and gratitude spread like the vast sun-lit smile of the ocean when the dark storm has passed away. And last of all the outer life of conduct is reached, and the members which before were yielded as servants unto iniquity, now become servants of righteousness unto holiness, till again the features respond to the inner change and become "beautiful in the light of holiness."

So God works from within outwards. His glory is never applied from without but shines from within. S. Paul refers to this characteristic difference between the external polish which satisfies the world and the inward renovation which comes from Christ when he says: "Be not conformed to the world, but be ye transfigured (μεταμορφοῦσθε) by the renewing of your minds."

That is, I think, the primary meaning of the parable, "The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened."

But we may give the words a wider application. We may regard them as supplying a description of the process of the action of the principles of Christ upon Society at large.

What we call Society has a conscience. It is not Christian indeed, but it tends as the ages go on to approximate towards a Christian standard. It allows and approves of much that Christ condemns. It tolerates and even smiles upon idleness if it is endowed and wholly unconnected with begging. It has no objection to gambling if it is done in drawing-rooms. It does not harshly condemn excess if confined to the privacy of a man's own house. But, on the other hand, it has a line below which it will not go. It denounces treachery. It condemns many forms of dishonesty, and it is opposed to cruelty when it cannot traditionally be called "Sport." Such is the conscience of Society. In a general way we may say that it is formed by taking the highest with the lowest and by striking an average. The standard of the highest is put aside as

impracticable and eccentric, the lowest is not respectable. The conscience settles on the average.

Now as each man becomes truly Christian he cannot fail to be dissatisfied with the average, for however far below his standard he may fall, no Christian can be truly loyal who *aims* at less than the highest. Nor, on the other hand, will any one who honestly aims at the highest fail to rise much above the average. And so it follows that as a result of his effort the average itself slowly rises.

Thus, although sincere followers of Christ are as few compared with the multitude as the leaven is small in quantity compared with the dough, yet their action—like that of the leaven on the dough—is powerful to influence the whole of the society in which they dwell.

It has been truly said that "God works by minorities." It is not numbers that are needed to raise the community, but the loyalty and intensity of the few.

What the world needs above every-

thing is that the life of Christ should be manifested in the lives of His people.

In the thirteenth century the Church had sunk into a condition of torpid worldliness. Religion seemed to have lost its power to influence for good the lives of men.

> "Its form still stood without a breach
> When life and warmth were fled,
> And still it spoke its wonted speech,
> But every word was dead."

And into that corrupt and luxurious age God sent Francis of Assisi to be born. At once, as by a miracle, all was changed. Great men gave up their positions, rich men gave up their wealth, and for Christ's sake wandered in poverty homeless from place to place preaching His word and doing His work. Social barriers were broken down. True religion revived, and all over Southern Europe love and joy and peace sprang to birth like spring flowers after a dreary winter. And what was the explanation of it all? S. Francis in his own life manifested in all its glorious and literal simplicity

the life of Christ. He did not retire from the world to save himself, he mingled with the world to raise and bless and redeem it.

It is the truest economy of the Church to produce *Saints*. There is no more fatal error than to sacrifice the holiness of the few for the respectability of the multitude. Those who aim only at the average inevitably fall below it, and, so the nett result of their lives is to drag the average lower yet. On the other hand, the life of a true follower of Christ produces a ferment in the Society in which he lives. New attractions and repulsions are displayed. The attractions are manifested in imitation; the repulsions in persecution; and so its influence, like that of the leaven, spreads.

Gradually, as the standard of the conscience rises, abuses fall below the line of the average, and then—though not till then—Society is ripe for sweeping them away.

At one time slavery was considered tolerable, and enforced labour of young children in mines and mills, but the

standard of the national conscience rose and these abuses fell below the line of the average and were abolished.

It would take comparatively little effort to-day if Christian people would combine to get drunkenness (*e.g.*) regarded as a public crime. In any case, let us recognise that that average conscience such as it is is the only effective weapon of reform which we possess. Our first duty is to use it to sweep away all abuses that fall below its standard, and our next by every effort in our power to raise that standard to a higher point of efficiency.

The Parable of the Hidden Treasure.

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The Parable of the Hidden Treasure.

S. MATTHEW XIII. 44.

"The kingdom of heaven is like unto a treasure hidden in a field; which a man found, and hid; and in his joy he goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field."

S. MATTHEW specially tells us that the first four parables which we have just considered were spoken to the mixed crowd who along with His disciples were gathered round the Master. Then there was an interval. He "sent the multitude away, and went into the house: and His disciples came unto Him," and asked for an explanation of the Parable of the Tares. Jesus explained it, and then added, as He so often did, the words which reminded

them that it had an esoteric meaning which *they* ought to grasp, though the outside world would miss it, "He that hath ears, let *him* hear."

Then speaking to His disciples only, our Lord went on to tell the last three Parables of the Kingdom, the Parables of the Hidden Treasure, and of the Pearl of Great Price and the final Parable of the Draw Net.

"*The kingdom of heaven is like unto a treasure hidden in a field; which a man found, and hid; and in his joy he goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field.*" The discovery of concealed treasure is quite a common thing in the East—there the earth is the bank in which savings are deposited, and it often happens that men die leaving the secret of the place untold. Then—perhaps long years afterwards—the discovery is made by a stranger.

So the man in the parable unexpectedly comes upon the treasure. It had been lying near to him all the time and he knew it not. But notice the effect on him of the discovery. It creates a revolu-

tion in his thoughts. At once all his old plans for the future are out of date. Old values are depreciated. He thinks in different terms. This neglected field had meant nothing to him before. Now his thoughts hardly ever leave it. It is not his yet, but henceforth his thoughts and plans are quite different from those of his neighbours. He measures things by a different standard. He removes the treasure to a different place. He keeps his secret. He goes about his ordinary work. He buys and sells. He mingles with others as before, but the dominating desire of his life and work now is *the possession of that field.*

"Where his treasure is, there his heart is also."

Is that not a striking picture of what happens when with something of the shock of discovery, the overwhelming importance of spiritual things is brought home to a man? Think of what it is that men chiefly value. Where is it their hearts are all day long? They toil in the fields of commerce, of politics, of literature, art, or science. Their

energies are concentrated and spent on that side of life which deals with that which is earthly and transitory.

But there is another field—so often left all untilled. It lies on that side of life which looks out on the spiritual and eternal. It is but little worked and but little valued, and yet it has as its treasure the eternal things, the possession of spiritual truth, the knowledge of the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The treasure of that field is hid. It does not lie on the surface. Words that to this man or that have meant nothing less than *life* have meant to others, though quite familiar with them, nothing at all.

S. Augustine tells us that before he definitely turned to God he had one day, when distracted by a deep sense of his sinfulness, cast himself down alone beneath a fig tree in the garden, when suddenly he heard a voice as of a boy chanting and repeating again and again the words, "Take up, read," and interpreting it as a Divine command he went to the place where he had laid down a copy of S.

Paul's Epistle, and took it up, and eagerly read the first passage which met his eye: "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh in its lusts." "I would read no further," he says, "nor was there any need, for instantly when I had finished the sentence, by a serene light as it were infused into my heart all the clouds of doubt were dispersed."

A somewhat similar story is told in the Life of Captain Hedley Vicars. He, too, had times of intense seriousness, but he too "hesitated much." One day, as he was waiting for the return of a brother officer, he turned over idly the pages of a Bible on the table, and the words caught his eye, "The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin." He closed the book. Then and there he resolved that if those words were true for him henceforth he would live as a man should live who has been so forgiven. "The past," he said, "is blotted out. I cannot return to the

sins from which my Saviour has cleansed me with His own blood."

Surely both these incidents are striking illustrations of the sudden finding of hid treasure in a very familiar field.

The treasure was found before it was actually possessed and secured. The discoverer took steps not to lose it again. He found it and hid it. The first duty seemed to be *silence*. And that is necessary, for the whole life needs re-arranging on the new basis. The perspective is changed. In the flash of a vision, as it were, the man has seen how transitory and trifling are all earthly things, and how all-important are the things of the Spirit. But can that standpoint be maintained, and what does it involve? All the habits and tendencies of desires and thoughts and actions go the other way. They must be one by one controlled, directed, regulated according to the new knowledge. The man has *seen*. Henceforth his standard of value is different from those among whom he lives. Losses and gains, wealth and poverty, changes and trials, affect him differently from

them. Old interests, old discussions, old employments and habits come and claim their old ascendency, but now behind all—dominating all—there is the new knowledge. So there is silence. He has found and hid the treasure. He goes about his daily work as before, but a new and lasting joy has entered into his life. "Where his treasure is there is his heart also."

And now his visits to his field of treasure are frequent and regular. That field lies as we have seen on the side of our being which faces the spiritual and eternal. To enter it we must withdraw the consciousness from the things of sense, we must still the emotions and concentrate the thoughts. We have to enter into our own inner being. It is not a door with hinges to which our Lord refers when He says, "Thou, when thou prayest, enter into thine inner chamber, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father in secret."

Here, as elsewhere, our Divine Lord, like all great Masters of the spiritual life, insists on the overwhelming import-

ance of meditation. It is the appointed way in which we, in this age, and people of every age, can as truly and literally meet with Him and sit as disciples at His feet as did the apostles nineteen hundred years ago. And what we thus learn from Him becomes a part of our immortal self. It is ours for ever. Other learning may pass and be forgotten, but not this. We shall realise again and again in our times of need the truth of His promise that the Holy Spirit "shall call to your remembrance WHATSOEVER I HAVE SAID unto you."

How near that treasure is to us all and how few seem to find it! If we let the world absorb practically all our energies, it is a sure proof that the Real Treasure is still to seek. Our attitude to the things of the world ought to be the attitude of the finder of the hid treasure to his old possessions. Can we say that it is?

The Parable of the Pearl of Great Price.

VI.

The Parable of the Pearl of Great Price.

S. Matthew xiii. 45, 46.

"The kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a merchant seeking goodly pearls; and having found one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it."

Side by side with the parable which tells of the hidden treasure in that neglected field of meditation we have the companion parable which describes the discovery of the Truth as the result of steady and continuous search for it.

"*Again the Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a man that is a merchant seeking goodly pearls: and having found one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it.*"

The pearl is what S. Paul calls the gnosis or the knowledge of the Mysteries,

to which our Lord refers when He says, ' To you it is given to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven."

In every race, in every age, in every religion there are honest seekers after God. What could be grander than our Lord's way of putting it, " I say unto you many shall come from the east and from the west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the Kingdom of God " ? " Of a truth," says S. Peter, " I perceive that God is no respecter of persons : but in every nation he that feareth Him and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to Him." There are no limits circumscribing the width of that magnificent promise, " Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled." If God plenteously answers our lower desires : if earth's harvest is God's answer to earth's hunger, how much more surely will the seekers after truth be rewarded with the knowledge of the Mysteries.

Wherever there is the honest desire to learn, there, we may be sure, a teacher is waiting. Those who are far down in

the scale of development will naturally be helped by those just above them, and for those more advanced unseen Teachers are ready. All would give Cornelius the centurion a place among the seekers after God. Earnest, devout, sincere in his desire to be taught, he was met by the traditional prejudice against Gentiles on the part of the Christians of that time, who were all Jews. But that the law that where a pupil is ready a teacher will be sent should not be broken, a higher Being intervened, telling Cornelius to send for the apostle and then charging S. Peter in his trance not to refuse the request. "The Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a man that is a merchant seeking goodly pearls," constantly ready, that is, to exchange worse for better, partial for fuller truth. The words suggest a quality as splendid as it is rare. The merchantman represents the noblest of the human race; *those who seek for Truth without prejudice and at all costs.*

They do not fit well into systems, but they value truth for its own sake.

They seek for it with honest, unprejudiced eyes, and recognise and welcome it whenever they see it. "Out of Nazareth can any good thing come?" exclaims Nathanael. Yet out of that town came the Redeemer of the World.

Think of the words which Browning puts into the mouth of the philosopher Cleon, in answer to the King interested in S. Paul and Christianity :—

"Thou canst not think a mere barbarian Jew,
As Paulus proves to be—one circumcised,
Hath access to a secret shut from us.
Thou wrongest our philosophy, O King,
In stooping to inquire of such an one
As if his answer could impose at all.
He writeth, doth he? Well, and he may write.
Oh, the Jew findeth scholars! Certain slaves
Who touched on this same isle preached him and Christ.
And, as I gathered from a by-stander,
Their doctrine could be held by no sane man."

The temptation is great to seek not for Truth but for the assurance that we already possess it. But the man represented by the merchant in the parable has the single eye. "God is light and in Him is no darkness at all;" that

is his motto, and we can admire with all our hearts the courage of those who seek the truth at all costs.

"*A merchantman seeking goodly pearls.*" Here he travels, and there, ever seeking, seeking, ever an unsatisfied desire. Is that evil?

Nay,

"Not for such doubts and fears
Annulling youth's brief years
Do I remonstrate—folly wide the mark!
Rather I prize the doubt
Low kinds exist without.
Finished and finite clods untroubled by a spark."

But there a goal to seeking. At length he finds "*One pearl of great price.*"

Dante tells us that when by God's especial grace he gained though but for a moment the Beatific vision, all desire ceased.

So S. Paul's glowing words express the very spirit of the parable. "What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea, doubtless, I count all things but loss for *the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord.*"

That is the language of one who has found the pearl of great price. And what is the price? Here, as in the preceding parable, it is "all that he hath."

Buying the Truth may take what we call a life-time, or far more than a life time, but sooner or later—now or ten thousand years hence—the price must be paid. Sooner or later the heart which has sought satisfaction in wealth or pleasure or fame or knowledge or power must abandon all to obtain the supreme possession of Love and Christ and God.

As poor as Christ on Calvary we must some day be willing to become, as weak as Christ nailed to the Cross. Then and only then shall we enter on the possession of all things and share "the power of an endless life."

The Parable of the Draw Net.

VII.

The Parable of the Draw Net.

S. Matthew xiii. 47-51.

"The kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind: which, when it was filled, they drew up on the beach; and they sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but the bad they cast away. So shall it be in the consummation of the age (margin R.V.); the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the righteous, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be the weeping and gnashing of teeth."

This last of the Parables of the Kingdom stands by itself.

It was the Lord's way to take as illustrations of His teachings objects which were very familiar, and those who lived around the Sea of Galilee, with its great fishing industry, would readily grasp the teaching drawn from the figure of the great net cast into the sea.

In other parables we have seen how the growth of the Kingdom of God is viewed from the spiritual side. In this parable we are taught in a striking and vivid figure at once *the value and the limitations of all external religious systems.*

There is no special or exclusive reference to the Christian Church, though naturally for us to-day that is the practical application. *In the widest sense it applies to all the efforts of the Powers above to reach and raise mankind by the aid of what is called religion.*

Here, as in at least two of the other parables, the work of the Angel Guardians and Guides of human development is plainly indicated. "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind: which, when it was filled, they drew up on the beach; and they sat down, and gathered the good into vessels but the bad they cast away."

How suitable an illustration it is—from the point of view of an angel! There is the bright air and sunshine above, and below the dim, dark, dreary

waters in which the fish have their life. How can the fishermen who live in the bright atmosphere reach the denizens of that dense lower element? In the very nature of things they cannot come into direct contact with them, so they have recourse to the drag net as an instrument. It is let down into the sea. Thus it does its work. It spreads its meshes wide. It goes down deep. It gathers of every kind. Visible itself, it is but an instrument in higher hands which guide it all unseen.

So from the beginnings of the human race those mighty ones who rule the world for God have sought to reach and save men by means of religions.

So regarding this parable, we learn at once its lesson of the value and the limitations of all external religious systems.

Look first at their value. An external system is the only means of approach. Angelic beings can no more manifest themselves in our surroundings than fishermen can live under the sea. But a religion—a Church—can be constructed

to reach men—to draw them into her system—to hold them with her rules.

If hearts are turned only towards the external and the perishable, then only by projecting something also external into that side of life can those hearts be reached and won. Then, again, while approaching us on the form side these systems always suggest, and are made to suggest, the spiritual, the unseen, the real.

Look, for example, at the sacramental system of the Church. It ever witnesses to the world unseen and brings it nearer—much nearer—to us. If we cannot see as saints and angels and some poets do that

> "Earth's crammed with Heaven, and every common bush
> On fire with God."

We can at least see through the sacramental sign as through a window the present reality of that which it signifies.

Look at that law, which runs through nature, of the incessant breaking of form

and the ceaseless pouring out of life. If we cannot see how vain is the struggle against it in the lower creation, and how blessed it is to accept it and co-operate with it, then see! in His great Eucharist the Saviour takes the Bread into His hands and Himself breaks it and says, "THIS IS MY BODY which is being broken for you;" and He takes the Cup and says, "THIS IS MY BLOOD which is being poured out for you." He accepts the law against which lower nature dashes itself in vain and He says to His followers, "THIS DO."

May we not apply to that scene the words in which the poet makes the dying S. John express his sense of the cosmic significance of the life and actions of the Christ?

> "Stay there at gaze till it dispart, dispread,
> As though a star should open out all sides,
> Grow the world on you—as it is my world."

But if we are taught in this last parable to recognise the value of an exoteric system, we are shown no less clearly its limitations.

The net is not constructed to admit only the good. It works indiscriminately. It gathers of all kinds. It bears them all along, good and bad alike, in its sweeping rush through the sea of human life. It is an instrument in the hands of the Powers above, but after all only an instrument. The innate tendency to value it for its own sake rather than for that which it was created to do—to "worship the drag and burn incense to the net" is one which we should sternly repress in ourselves. It was probably just this tendency against which S. John directs the warning in what would seem to be the very last words of the New Testament Canon. Addressing himself to the least developed members of the Christian flock, those whom he calls "little children" as distinguished from the "young men" and from the "fathers" he bids them guard against mistaking the means for the end. "Little children," he writes, "guard yourselves from idols." The lesson for us is to use and value the means of grace and yet always to seek to see through them

the great realities which they symbolise and enshrine.

For none are unaffected by this contact with the means of grace. Being within the net brings nearer the great crisis of separation. "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a net that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind: which, when it was filled, they drew up on the beach; and they sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but the bad they cast away." Compare "they gathered the good into vessels" with "gather the wheat into my barn." The teaching is obviously the same in both cases. The separation is going on all the time in God's great silent way. "He that is near Me" is a saying attributed to the Christ, "is near to the fire: he that is far from Me is far from the Kingdom."

"*The bad they cast away.*" It is worthy of notice that in our Lord's own explanation He breaks from the metaphor of the parable in order to change and strengthen it. "So shall it be in the consummation of the age; the angels shall come forth and sever the wicked

from among the righteous, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire. Then shall be the weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Thus our Lord brought to a close this great series of the Parables of the Kingdom. And when He had finished He asked them, "Have ye understood all these things? They say unto Him, Yea. And He said unto them, Therefore every scribe who hath been made (note the phrase) a disciple to the Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a man that is an householder which bringeth forth out of his treasures things new and old."

Yes, he has gained a new point of view from which to survey the old eternal truths. He goes back to the old Bible and reads or hears the old teaching and now it speaks with a new and living meaning. It is new because now for the first time it is seen by the opened eyes of the Spirit; old because it was there to be seen all the time. It is old in form, new in significance; old in principle, new in its application to the changing circumstances of everyday life. "Things

new and old." Things old as Calvary, old as the love of God; new as the word of forgiveness spoken to-day and the joy of reconciliation.

We do not need to change the old, we dare not depart from it, but we do need above all things to see it and study it from a different standpoint from that of mere casual listeners or that of those critics who recognise no faculty higher than human reason. "Spiritual things are spiritually discerned," and apart from an awakened spiritual faculty they cannot be discerned at all.

That is why we *need* "Retreats" and "Quiet Days," when we shut out the external and gather round the feet of the Lord Christ to be taught as disciples. And that is why at such times old words come to us with new and living meaning, and there is stored up in that part of us which cannot die a treasure of things "new and old."

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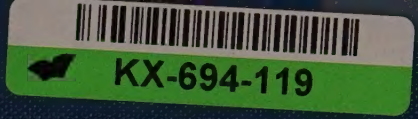
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